MY TURN

'I'm a Relationship Therapist—This is Why People Cheat and How to Recover'

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MY TURN CHEATING RELATIONSHIPS DATING MARRIAGE

For over a decade I have been a relationship counselor in private practice in South West London, working with couples and individuals on improving communication, restoring lost desire, sexual problems and recovery from affairs.

I have a master's degree in social work from the University of Sussex, and spent many years as an academic at the American University in Richmond, teaching philosophy; which is, in my opinion, closely aligned with psychotherapy.

I believe working with couples is a kind of "live philosophy"—people grappling with the meaning of life and how to live more fulfilling lives together. One of the most interesting aspects of my job is working with couples who have experienced infidelity.

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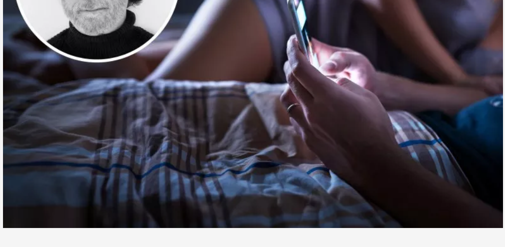
Infidelity can be an incredibly distressing experience for the clients— but it's extremely rewarding if I am able to help a couple work through their crisis. In my experience, the discovery of an affair is like a hand grenade going off in a relationship.

You may remember an experience as a kid, walking around the local store with mom and dad. It's a normal day, and everything is fine. But then, you look up, and they're gone. Sudden panic. Disorientation. It feels like the whole world tips.



James Earl is a psychotherapist and relationship counselor based in southwest London. He specializes in communication, restoring desire, help with sexual issues and recovery from affairs. Stock image.
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The experience of being cheated on

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Clients of mine who discover an affair for the first time often remember feeling a "jolt"; they describe a sickening empty-tummy feeling that makes them feel nothing can be the same again. They think: "What just happened? Right after that first question, the second is usually: "How could you do this to me? I thought you loved me."

Couples often book a session with me right after the discovery of an affair. The questions keep coming. Who, what, when and how this happened are usually the first concerns. The person who was cheated on needs to know the facts. After all, their partner has been living two narratives: normal life at home, and their affair-story. We need to play catch-up, and the only way to process is to ask questions.

Often, even at this early stage after discovery, things can get worse if the person who had the affair refuses to talk openly. They may well feel the truth would hurt too much. For example, questions like: "Did you see him/her on my birthday?" or "Was the sex good?" might be a hard answer

While there are methods for couples to address these awkward conversations and repair the breach of trust, there are some important questions, underlying these fraught emotional encounters, which need to be answered first:

Why do affairs happen? Is it possible to have an affair if we truly love someone? What can we do to make affairs less likely?

How common is cheating?

Affairs are incredibly common. There are studies that suggest that in almost half of all long term relationships there is infidelity. Many of your friends will likely have gone through the experience—even if they don't talk about it. And despite stereotypes, in my experience, men and women are equally as likely to cheat.

In the couples I see, it is slightly more common for men to cheat when younger, and women as they get older. This shift may be a reflection of the fact many women report higher interest in and satisfaction with sex later in life, while male sexual interest tends to declines with age.

Same-sex couples seem to experience this issue in exactly the same way as other couples, which for me is no surprise, since relationship problems seem to be universal irrespective of gender or sexual orientation.

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So, how can we make sense of affairs? Are humans just pathetic at keeping their promises? Or is monogamy an unrealistic concept? After all, we have plenty of ideals that can be hard to stick to, but which we might still want to uphold—for example, not shouting at your kids.

First off, in my experience, affairs don't generally happen just for sex. Even in couples where sex has really slowed down—which, I believe, is the majority of long-term relationships—there is rarely a strong impetus to just "go get some sex".

One client of mine, Betty*, had an affair at the end of her long marriage where, years before, sex had stopped. When her husband discovered the affair, he said: "I thought you weren't interested in all that anymore?"

It is clear from this case that making assumptions, even if everyone seems happy on the surface, is unwise. Betty, although admitting that the sexual experience was "wonderful", said: "But it wasn't really just about sex. I just felt like we had such fun together."

Another client, Tony*, said he hadn't even really fancied the work colleague he'd slept with, at first. He told his partner: "I just felt she showed me such interest: and going to bed together just felt—well, kind of natural."

Equally, in apparently loving relationships, affairs can still happen. "Honestly, I didn't stop loving you," is a phrase which is commonly used in my sessions. It is ironic that the sexual aspect of an affair—sex being the thing we usually associate with the term affair- may not be the key driver of infidelity.

"It just happened, it wasn't planned—we were just getting on," is another phrase used in my sessions often. So, what draws the moth to the candle?

Why people have affairs

James says the most common complaints in long-term relationships are: "I don't feel heard" and "I don't feel like you see me". Stock image.
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The most common complaints in long-term relationships are: "I don't feel heard" and "I don't feel like you see me". When someone, often in a work context, turns to us and makes us feel like they properly see us, and are genuinely listening, we can feel like we have re-emerged in the world.

Clients of mine who have had an affair often say: "I just loved the interest I was being shown. It brought back a lost sense of myself." It is this sense of being reunited with an earlier "you", that is so seductive in an affair.

My client, Sue, found she was growing close to a colleague at work. They didn't sleep together, but developed a sexting relationship for a few weeks until her husband found out. In a session with me later she said: "I just felt like I was back twenty years, before marriage and kids; the old me, sexy me, not mum-me. It was so liberating asking for what I wanted, after years of just being there for everyone else."

The couple came to me to try and get back on track, and we worked on how they might experience some of the excitement Sue had felt in the sext-affair, but with her husband.

The problem is, at the time, this interest can feel like a real growth experience. Personal growth is a very strong driver for most of us, arguably stronger than sex. The trouble is, going on to sexualize a vivid connection like this is easy, and seems to make sense.

There is no doubt it's difficult to offer your undivided attention to another person in most long-term relationships. Often, we take on a whole hamster-wheel of deadening routine; children, work, money, mortgages, stress and tiredness, which make that level of connection difficult.

We also acquire different roles in relation to our partner, beyond that of simply dating and being playmates. Early in a relationship, during the dating phase, we relate to each other just as playmates; no responsibilities, just a desire to have fun, hang out, make each other laugh and have sex.

After this phase, which usually lasts only three to six months, we usually decide to either end the relationship, or commit to a longer-term connection. If we decide to commit, we often start living together at some point, taking on board the practicalities of everyday life, and starting a new quasi-parental relationship with each other.

We become each other's "person"—looking out for one another. Taking on this caring role is a developmental phase in all long-term couples, and means there are now two relationships in one—the original play relationship and the new parental one.

These two relationships, while they support each other, also create some tension. Caring for someone is very different to just having fun with them. And these feelings can get a little jumbled, often leading to a loss of desire.

So, as the relationship progresses, we are also meant to be best friends, potentially co-parents or business partners. Usually, we're the center of a whole world of friends and family. Plus, we are expected to give each other full attention, and be red-hot lovers.

This is a challenging, and perhaps impossible, list for many couples. When things go flat in the primary relationship, an affair can feel truly unhinged—crazy, but it also unhinges the routines and roles of everyday life. This is why they feel freeing.

How to recover and make affairs less likely

James says affairs are incredibly common, and in his experience men and women are equally as likely to cheat.
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Firstly, after an affair is discovered, the truth is essential. There is no way to process what happened unless the person who has cheated answers all the questions their partner asks.

Answering honestly also provides the couple with the basis for a more honest, open relationship in the future, if they're hoping to stay together. Any new revelations dripping out over the months ahead are usually highly corrosive; so I recommend making a clean breast of it at the beginning.

For example, one of my clients, Jack, was reluctant to talk about his affair because he felt it: "was in the past," and he felt that he and Sally "should look to the future."

I pointed out that Sally needed to find out what had happened to be able to process it, and to decide if she felt able to continue in the marriage. Jack was resistant at first, particularly when Sally was asking questions about the sex. He didn't want to hurt her, or make things worse.

But it was the not knowing that was holding her up, and in fact, sex wasn't the real issue. Sally needed to know that Jack could talk to her honestly, so she could begin to trust him again.

And, it turned out, sex had been a real problem for her; much of the time it had been dutiful rather than pleasurable. Now, the couple were able to talk about this tricky subject with a lot more honesty, In a few weeks, they were able to begin transform their own sex lives, asking for what they wanted ,and being open about how sex was fun for each of them.

The next thing I recommend doing is trying to review the relationship together, in a non-confrontational way. Can you list the needs you have? How might you try and meet them together? What would work better for you?

Think of emotional support, good conversation, non-sexual physical touch, and playfulness of all kinds. Being there for each other, having fun and supporting each other's growth.

Sally explained that sex with Jack was often initiated by a simple: "So, do you fancy it then?" She felt there was no build up or context for their physical relationship. We spent some time looking at how to build a mood, through playful connection outside sex. I also recommended that the couple "book in" sex.

This may sound un-spontaneous, but it takes most couples back to when they were dating, when we had days of preparation before they met. This gives plenty of time to anticipate, prepare, and be in the right head space for sex.

This is a really good exercise to minimize the risk of an affair happening, as well as repairing a relationship after one has occurred.

And then, I suggest my clients think about how is sex "sitting" in the relationship? Is it fun, or just another chore? Dutiful sex is usually dreadful. Talk about sex to check what is fun for each other. This is less about fancy positions in the bedroom, and more about themes:

For example, what "vibe" you when being sexual? Playful and funny? Loving and passionate? Rude and dirty? During sex, do I prefer you leading or me? Try catching up like this about the relationship in general, and sex, once a week for half an hour.

With Sally and Jack, we went on to discuss what sex meant to both of them. Was it a way of connecting, as it was for Jack, or the expression of a connection, as it was for Sally? And what kind of sex made the lights go on for each partner?

Monogamy is not the only type of relationship these days, of course. However, it is still the choice of many couples, and it can work—if you talk. Even after a breach of trust, it can still work. While it is a familiar platitude, the honesty following an affair can make a couple stronger.

James Earl is a psychotherapist and relationship counselor based in southwest London. He specializes in communication, restoring desire, help with sexual issues and recovery from affairs. Find out more about him at jamesearl.com

**Names in this article have been changed.*

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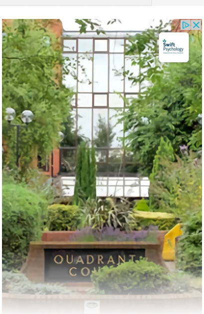
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